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AUTHOR Washburn, Judith Sostarich
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ABSTRACT

Through storytelling and creative drama, teachers can introduce children to good quality literature they might otherwise miss. By making the connection between books and storytelling and between books and creative drama, the storyteller/teacher introduces literature as a source of pleasure. Storytelling and creative dramatics also give children insight into the motives and patterns of human behavior, and understanding plot and character helps children understand literature. Storytelling allows closer interaction between teacher and children, and the teacher may modify the story to meet the needs of the group or personalize the story to match the children's age and interests, thus insuring comprehension. Storytelling also encourages children to listen to the patterns of language and variety of vocabulary. When choosing stories, the storyteller/teacher should consider the audience, the story, the purpose for telling the story, and the storyteller's personal preference. The storyteller/teacher can choose from myths, sagas, folktales, narrative poetry, realistic stories, or biographical stories. In creative activities, children become more involved with a story and identify with the characters they have chosen to recreate. Responding to a story by retelling it or by acting it out with creative dramatics helps children internalize the plot, characters, and vocabulary of the story. (HTH)

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LITERATURE, STORYTELLING AND CREATIVE DRAMA

Judith Sostarich Washburn
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LITERATURE, STORYTELLING, AND CREATIVE DRAMA

The aim of any reading program must be more than acquainting children with phonics, workbook exercises, and comprehension drills. A primary reason for sounding out letters and filling in workbooks is to open the world of literature to children. There is a vast array of literature just waiting to be found and enjoyed by children. However, with so many books in print it is possible for children to read a great number of books without reading one book of literary merit. Through storytelling and creative drama, we can introduce children to literature, to the quality books, that they might otherwise miss (Baker, p. 20).

"Through storytelling, teachers help transmit the literature heritage" (Huck, p. 717). Storytelling allows the teacher to have intimate contact with the children; there is no book or printed word to separate the teacher from the audience. The teacher may modify the story to meet the needs of the group or personalize the story to match the children's age and interest. By matching age and interest, the storyteller helps to ensure that the children comprehend the story. A good storyteller has a variety of stories available to tell to meet the needs and interests of the class or audience. I have seen storytellers catch the attention of the class with a personal word or a special look.

Dewey Chambers describes the essence of the art of storytelling this way:

> Good storytelling, on a one-storyteller, one-group basis, is a highly creative personal experience. It is an experience that develops and glows for a brief period and then disappears. It is an experience that can never be or ever should be, exactly the same again. Story time is a time of mutual creation, the storyteller and the listener creating together a world built on words and imagination. It is a wonderful, almost secret, private time. (Chambers, p. 10)

In short, storytelling is a unique and personal way to acquaint children with a variety of literature forms and to awaken their interest in quality literature.

Creative drama may also be used to stimulate children's interest in literature. "Creative drama is structured and cooperatively-planned playmaking" (Huck, p. 665). "With creative drama, children create or re-create a scene, an episode, a problem, or an event..." (Chambers, p. 52). Usually the scene, problem, or event comes from children's literature. The creative drama activity is planned and performed under the teacher's guidance where the emphasis is on the process and not the product. Children become more involved with a story and identify with the characters they have chosen to recreate. As in pretend play, children come to believe in the roles they assume. My son and daughter have enjoyed taking turns assuming to be Alexander in Judith Viorst's Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day, especially after Mary and Mark have had a "bad day."

Unlike dramatic play, creative dramatics demands structure, planning, and evaluation on the part of the teacher. I suggest interested teachers read Dewey Chamber's Storytelling and Creative Drama or Janet Goodridge's Creative Drama and Improvised Movement for Children for further information.

Storytelling and creative dramatics are related to literature in that they may be used by an interested teacher to bring children and books together. By making the connection between books and storytelling and books and creative dramatics, the storyteller-teacher introduces quality books as a source of pleasure. Reluctant readers have the opportunity to share in literature they might have missed through the experience of hearing stories told or participating in creative dramatic experiences. Storytelling and creative dramatics gives children insight into the motives and patterns of human behavior; understanding plot and character helps children understand literature. Storytelling and creative dramatics also give children the opportunity to experience literature before they are able to read it. Finally, storytelling encourages children to listen. Children listen to the patterns of language and a variety of vocabulary; the skills developed while listening are part of learning to comprehend.

Since the number of books, stories, and tales available is great, the storyteller-teacher must wisely select stories to tell. When choosing stories, the teacher should consider the audience, the story, the purpose for telling the story, and the storyteller's personal preferences.

Storytelling is a shared experience; the storyteller tells the story but the audience, the children, need to be actively involved in the experience. If a story's objective is to be realized, the story must be adapted to meet the needs of the individual child.

Joseph Wagner, in Children's Literature through Storytelling, and Augusta Baker and Ellia Greene, in Storytelling: Art and Technique, discuss specific characteristics of children's age groups and offer selections for appropriate stories at each age level. Wagner calls the three-to-six-year age group the "Age of Repetition" (Wagner, p. 16). Children at this age respond to rhythm and repetition. Stories which contain concrete, familiar objects, talking animals and a repetitious plot appeal to this age group. Therefore, children would enjoy "The Three Little Pigs," "The Gingerbread Boy," and "Three Billy Goats Gruff." The storyteller would be wise to choose stories with short dialogue, clear and simple images, action that builds quickly to a climax, and a satisfying ending to meet the needs of an audience of young listeners. Children at this age also enjoy stories, songs, and poems that appeal to their five senses. After hearing "Blue" in Mary O'Neill's Hailstones and Halibut Boxes, my daughter remarked, "You can sure hear blue at the ocean."

Children become more and more interested in make believe stories as they get older. Wagner labels the period from six-to-nine-years as the "Age of Fantasy" (Wagner, p. 17). This "is the magical period for storytellers and children alike" (Wagner, p. 17). Children could be introduced to Grimm's "The Golden Goose," Filmore's "The Twelve Months," or "Cinderella." "Stories of this period. . . should reward generosity and punish evil-doing and selfishness. Although the immediate

effect of a fairy tale is to entertain, the longterm effect of such stories may have moral significance. The child's reaction of approval or disapproval during these vicarious experiences assists him to develop a sense of values (Wagner, p. 17).

As children get older, they enjoy more sophisticated folktales. Children over nine are looking for something that will appeal to their developing power of reason and judgment and to their concern about competency. These children enjoy hero tales, myths, and legends. Children like to experience danger, daring, and action from a vicarious vantage point. For example, Robin Hood and King Arthur as retold by Harold Pyle are good choices for children at this age. Older children also enjoy the exaggerated humor of the tall tales. They also become interested in biographies. Perhaps the teacher could share James Daugherty's Daniel Boone or Sonburg's Abe Lincoln Grows Up.

Children of eleven or twelve "are experiencing sexual awakening and are involved in a search for personal identity" (Baker, p. 30). "These older children are "ready to appreciate the development of the plot, the beauty of language, and the deeper meanings that lie behind words" (Baker, p. 30). Baker and Greene recommend the romantic stories of Eleanor Farjeon, the bittersweet fairy tales of Laurence Housman, and the fantasies of Tolkien (Baker, p. 30).

Once the storyteller-teacher has determined the audience and the interests of the audience, the teacher selects the story or stories to be told. "The variety of stories available to the modern storyteller is infinite" (Colwell, p. 266). From the oral tradition, the storyteller-teacher may choose to retell myths, sagas, or folktales. A myth is a traditional or legendary story which is concerned with gods and supernatural beings. It frequently attempts to explain some basic truth (Wagner, p. 14). A saga is a prose narrative of the heroic exploits of an individual or family. Sagas are written to commemorate some factual matter such as war, heroism during a natural disaster, or some other outstanding occurrence (Wagner, p. 14).

Storytellers may also choose to tell narrative poetry, realistic stories, or biographical stories. Wagner, in Children's Literature through Storytelling, lists stories appropriate for children at different grade levels. Likewise, Baker and Greene have a list of suggestions in their book, Storytelling: Art and Technique. The lists are available to interested storytellers.

Master storyteller Ruth Sawyer cautions beginning storytellers to select the stories with care. She writes:

> There is. . . that very personal relationship that exists between all storytellers and the stories they tell which must be taken into consideration. In spite of the fact that one may like a story immensely, . . . I am firmly convinced that certain storytellers are allergic to specific stories. In other words, there are stories that are not for you or for me, and personal liking has nothing whatsoever to do about it (Sawyer, p. 151).

Sawyer also recommends future storytellers take into account the structure of the story. She recommends the folktale as a story that is easy to tell because of its firmly knit and universal form (Sawyer, p. 154). "Any story loosely put together is a difficult story to tell no matter how amusing it may be" (Sawyer, p. 155).

In like manner, Dewey Chambers notes the relationship that must exist between the story and the storyteller. He lists criteria to consider when choosing a story to tell. The list includes the following:

1. Is the story one that personally excites the teller? Is it a tale he wants to share with others?
2. Is it a story he can tell? Perhaps the content and the mood of the story are not compatible with the personality of the teller.
3. Is it one that lends itself to telling? Or would the story be best served if it were read orally to the children, rather than told? (Chambers, p. 16)

The beginning storyteller-teacher may want to vary the storytelling approach. Some teachers feel comfortable introducing children to storytelling by using flannel

boards. "The flannel board story is an attention-getting device" (Huck, p. 719). Children become quite interested in what will appear next. The beginning storyteller may appreciate this approach because the figures may be arranged in sequence and serve as cues for the story. Ramon Ross illustrates the flannel board approach to storytelling in his excellent book, Storyteller. Paul Anderson's Flannel Board Stories for the Primary Grades is another book that may aid the teacher who wants to tell a flannel board story. However, the storyteller must still tell the story for the children to appreciate the rich vocabulary, the rhythm of the words, and the personal experience of hearing a good story told.

Another factor in selecting the appropriate literature to use for storytelling time is to consider the purpose of this particular literature experience. If the storyteller is planning to share a story during a regular story time, most tales in the storyteller's repetoire will do provided the number and age of the children in the audience is considered. However, if the purpose is to relate the story hour to another area of the curriculum, the storyteller must select a story appropriate to that event. Perhaps a social studies unit on the movement west could be highlighted with some taled of Paul Bunyan or Pecos Bill.

Finally, when choosing a story to tell, the teacher must look at herself or himself. The essentials for successful storytelling include interest in what one is describing and involvement in the story, a detailed picture of its events, and a desire that the listener should understand and share one's feelings (Colwell, pp. 266-267).

> Certain qualities are naturally an advantage for the would-be storyteller. A creative imagination can give life and colour to a story; a feeling for drama and a degree of skill in portraying character will lend the life and excitement that children so much enjoy. A capacity for seeing the funny side of life on different occasions, the humility to laugh at your own affections, a readiness to share the children's rather slapstick sense of humour, all help enormously (Colwell, p. 267).

It is also invaluable to have a wide knowledge of books and a desire to prepare and to tell stories.

Storytelling and creative dramatics are vehicles that can be used to improve children's comprehension. Although we have analyzed reading comprehension into some 367 subskills, we have failed to make children readers. Children have not caught the desire to read or perhaps learned the purpose for reading. Through storytelling and creative dramatics, the teacher may present literature to children that they might never have experienced by themselves. Storytelling can be a means of cultivating literary taste and appreciation as well as giving children the opportunity for associating with great thoughts and ideas. Dorothy Cohen found that by reading to children and then having the children respond to literature, teachers could improve children's scores on standardized reading tests. In the same way, responding to a story by retelling it or by acting it out with creative dramatics help children internalize the plot, characters, and vocabulary of the story.

The advantages of storytelling and creative dramatics are that they challenge the children to listen, to internalize, and to respond. Sara Lundsteen has pointed out the underlying similarities in critical listening and critical thinking. Children listen with rapt attention to the storyteller. They also pay close attention to the story they are planning to act out for cues to appropriate behavior for the roles they will play. These critical listening skills are transferred to critical reading skills.

Story telling and creative dramatics involve creative thinking. The television screen is not present. Scenes and characters must be imagined and dialogue created. This type of thinking requires thoughtful responses from the children. Creative dramatics also requires students to become involved in literary analysis as they structure and plan their activity.

In conclusion, storytelling and creative dramatics may be used by the interested teacher to expand the reading program. Using quality literature for storytelling and creative dramatic activities allows the teacher to expand the children's literary horizons. The aim is to interest children in books and "turn them on" to reading.

JSW:mm
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